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ABSTRACT

The seeds of mass communication research in broadcasting were extracurricular, not academic, inspired by experimental campus radio stations. Prior to the mid-1930s, radio research was scarce. Until World War II, radio speech was the most important topic, followed by articles on how to use radio for improving instruction. There are three increasingly likely explanations for this narrowness of scope: (1) teachers viewed broadcasting in terms of public address rather than from a theory of behavior, (2) speech was just establishing itself as a legitimate field, and (3) the idea of programatic research was alien to departments of speech. As a result, most early scholarship on broadcasting and communication was done in other departments. Paul Lazarsfeld's development of panel analysis and uses and gratifications studies and Robert Park's and George Gallup's work in public opinion research were especially important early influences. Motion picture research lagged well behind broadcasting research, but it too was influenced by earlier work outside the field, particularly literary and art theory. The disillusionment with mass communication research in the 1950s mirrors the disillusionment with the power of mass media itself. Marshall McLuhan's controversial work in the 1960s rekindled widespread interest in broadcasting research. (JL)

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THE HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN OUR FIELD

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For Speech Communication Association Meeting

The development of mass communication research in our field, with one exception, closely parallels the development of the rest of the field of speech as a scholarly enterprise. Like the bulk of the other early pedagogical concerns in our departments of speech, the early concerns about broadcasting were centered on one goal: the improvement of students' ability to do. This concern affected not only what and how we taught, but our research as well. Thus, just as one of the most common of the early broadcasting courses that we offered was Radio Speech or Speech in Radio, so the most common research had to with identifying the kind of speaking that was most effective on radio.

To understand the reasons for this historical phenomenon, which is quite at variance with the history of most disciplines during the early part of this century, it is essential to consider the seeds from which our current programs in speech communication and broadcasting emerged. Those seeds were not academic, they were extracurricular.

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Just as our modern theatre programs emerged in good part from the dramatic clubs that existed on most campuses in the early part of this century and our modern departments of speech were influenced by the existence of the debating societies, academic programs in broadcasting were probably inspired--at least in part--by the experimental campus radio stations which generally had been started by some students or professors of engineering who liked to tinker. Students involved with those enterprises wanted faculty help--to improve their skills at announcing and producing programs for radio. They also needed faculty advisers to insure continuity and direction which they were not getting from the constantly changing group of student leaders.

Those early empire builders who created the great departments of speech--the G. E. Densmores, the Edward Mabies, the Frank Rarigs, the Charles Woolberts, the Andrew Weavers, and the James O'Neills-- saw the potential of the budding medium of radio and its relationship to the general field of oral communication with which they were concerned. They undoubtedly also saw the potential in the great interest of young people in this new electronic medium to add to their growing domains and they took advantage of it. They added courses in radio to their curricula and then generally converted one of their rhetoric and public address scholars to teach them.

Since there were a relatively few great empire builders

in our field, the number of institutions which developed work in broadcasting in these early days was limited. One of the early teachers of broadcasting, Forest Whan, blamed this limitation for the meager body of radio research that was done prior to the mid-thirties (Whan, 1944). He reported that "as late as 1933 . . . only 16 colleges offered instruction in [radio] techniques." By the end of the decade, though, that number had leaped to over 360 and by the end of 1940 to well over 500.

Another chronicler of the early history of broadcasting research in our field, Edgar Willis, also bemoaned speech scholars' lack of interest in radio, despite the fact that, as he put it, "the development of radio broadcasting tremendously extended the influence of oral communication" (Willis, 1955, p. 261). He pointed out that it took nine years from the time that public radio began, which he spotted at 1920, before the first thesis about broadcasting appeared in our field. (That was an M.A. thesis completed at the University of Southern California by Katherine E. Shank on the topic, "A Study of the Relation of Certain Types of Voices to Successful Radio Broadcasting.") By 1940, only 35 of the 1200 or more graduate theses completed in departments of speech between 1929 and 1939 dealt with some aspect of radio--32 MAs and 3 PhDs. (The PhDs were Sherman Lawton's at Wisconsin in 1939 titled "The Basic Course in Radio," Winfred Bird's at Iowa in 1938 titled "An Analysis of the Aims and Practices of the Principal Sponsors of Education by

Radio in the United States," and Rupert Cortright's at Michigan on "A Technique for Measuring Perception Differences for Radio and Direct Audience Speaking.")

Two teachers of broadcasting were probably responsible for directing more than half of all of the thesis and dissertation research done in speech departments up to World War II--Henry Ewbank at Wisconsin and H. Clay Harshbarger at Iowa.

Almost all of the published articles by people from our field, as well as theses, were focussed on radio speech. The first article that appeared in The Quarterly Journal of Speech was titled "Principles of Effective Radio Speaking." That was in 1930, the author was Sherman Lawton. One article a year about radio appeared in QJS in 1931 and 1932 and two a year in 1933 and 1934. Their titles: "Broadcasting and Speech Habits," "Studies in the Techniques of Radio Speech," "The Radio Influences Speech," "Rates of Speech in Radio Speaking," "Radio Drama and the Speech Curriculum," and "Radio Speech in the High Schools."

While the primary focus of theses, dissertations, and articles in our field during this period was performance, a strong secondary focus was pedagogy: how to use radio for improving instruction in general or in some particular field.

It was many years before scholars in our field began to

consider seriously the impact of radio on the larger society, the ways in which the forms by which we communicate affect the forms by which we live. It is difficult in the nineteen eighties to discover for certain the reasons for this narrowness of vision of broadcasting research in the nineteen twenties and thirties. I suspect it was partly due to the fact that the training of the broadcasting teachers of that period had ill-prepared them for the task. They were viewing broadcasting through the lens of public address, rather than through a theory of behavior, of art, or of discourse that transcended modes of communication. A second possible reason for the hesitancy to depart too far from other kinds of research then going on in their departments was that speech itself was still a fledgling field, attempting to establish itself in the university community and not yet sufficiently secure to risk the breaking of new frontiers with totally different kinds of research on radio. The third, and I believe the most likely reason for our failure to develop important broadcasting scholarship is that the idea of programmatic research was largely alien to departments of speech, and programmatic research was needed. (To a very great extent, the lack of programmatic research remains a problem with the mass communication work in most departments of speech communication.)

Because of these problems--our failure to develop coherent programs of research and the narrow focus of the

work done within speech--most of the important early scholarship on broadcasting and mass communication generally was done outside departments of speech: in departments of sociology, psychology, and political science. Directing this influential research were people such as Paul Lazarsfeld, Carl Hovland, and Harold Lasswell. Hovland and Lasswell were propelled into mass communication research by World War II when our government wanted to understand how to do a better job of persuading massses of American draftees to put more heart into the fight. Each had done some work on the media earlier, but it was their wartime work that largely brought them into prominence as mass communication scholars.

Paul Lazarsfeld was involved in mass communication research much earlier, first in Europe, then in the Office of Radio Research at Princeton, and finally at the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University. He affected our field in many ways, most notably by making us more sophisticated methodologically. He not only led the development of many methods of study--most importantly panel analysis and uses and gratificationss--he stimulated us to be more sensitive to all of our research tools.

Another of the important early influences--both methodologically and, to a lesser extent, substantively--was the developing field of public opinion research. Here, the theoretical writings of Robert Park at the University of

Chicago were extremely important. Park, combining his experiences as a professional journalist with his academic work in psychology and sociology, gave us important insights to collective behavior and public opinion. Where Park provided the theory, George Gallup and his colleagues provided many of the sophisticated survey methods which became important for the academic scholar of mass communication. While a student at the University of Iowa, during his teaching years at Drake and Northwestern, and finally throughout his decades of work in advertising agencies and heading his own research firm, Gallup helped not only to make the Gallup Poll a household term, but also to make the practice of polling a highly sophisticated art.

Research on the motion picture followed quite a different path than broadcasting research. Apparently the first graduate thesis on the motion picture was Ray Short's M.A. thesis titled "A Social Study of the Motion Picture." It was completed at the University of Iowa in 1916, but it started no instant flood of research. It was four years before another thesis about the film was done, this one a PhD at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Despite the fact that the development of the motion picture preceded the development of broadcasting and that the first graduate thesis in film preceded the first one about radio, research on the motion picture soon lagged well behind that on broadcasting. Raymond Fielding attributes

this difference to the fact that broadcasting found its way into most college and university curricula by the 1930s--largely by way of speech and theatre departments. Study of the motion picture, on the other hand, did not become a significant part of college and university curricula until the 1950s and 60s (Fielding, 1979).

Because no academic field lay claim to the study of the motion picture, as the field of speech had done for radio and journalism had done for the newspaper, what little research was done on cinema originated in a greater variety of departments. The result was that the focus of the research varied by institution, depending on the academic home of the faculty member who became an early film buff. Thus, in the four universities in which a significant number of film theses were done prior to 1950, that research was largely audio-visual work at Ohio State, production and aesthetics at the University of Southern California, psychological and child developmental at the University of Iowa, and largely instructional at Boston University.

As with broadcasting, contemporary scholarship in film has been influenced more by the earlier work from outside our field than by that within it. The influences on film, though, are more from humanities scholars than social scientists. More than anything else, the history that has shaped our film research is the history of literary theory and research and, to a lesser extent, art theory.

The history of mass communication research cannot be discussed meaningfully without noting the disillusion with it in the 1950s--in good part because of disillusionment about the power of the mass media. The most productive scholars to that point had become involved with mass communication research because they thought the media were tremendously powerful and that that power could be harnessed if we could just understand their interaction with people. When these scholars failed to find the sorts of direct, powerful effects they expected, they turned away from mass communication research and returned to more traditional studies in their respective fields.

Although it is virtually impossible to establish causal relationships with historical data in a persuasive way for the skeptics--a group within which I include myself--I am convinced that one person is largely responsible for rekindling widespread interest in social scientific research on mass communication. He was an odd person to play such a role for he had little faith in the social sciences--he was more poet than scholar, preferring the stimulating metaphor to observable fact, analogy to data. I am referring, of course, to Marshall McLuhan.

Few of us who were doing research in mass communication accepted the work of McLuhan in the 1960s when he gained national attention. We pointed out his inconsistencies, his inaccuracies, the impossibility of testing his claims or,

much of the time, even understanding precisely what those claims were. In spite of ourselves, though, he changed the way we looked at our world and, hence, the way we looked at our work. He stimulated us to reconceptualize mass communication processes which, in turn, led us to begin asking different types of questions. In this way, he was largely responsible for the great resurgence in mass communication research that we see today and, even more important, for the fact that that research is more theoretical. It is in good part because of Marshall McLuhan, and the increasing body of young scholars who have been influenced, either directly or indirectly by him, that the next decade or two should be highly productive of fine mass communication research.

Fielding, Raymond, comp. A Bibliography of Theses and Dissertations on the Subject of Film: 1916-1979. Monograph No. 3. Houston, TX: University Film Association, 1979.

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